

A Journey into the Interior of Borneo to visit the Kalabit tribes.

By R. S. DOUGLAS.

I propose to give a short account of a journey I recently made to visit the Kalabits, a people who had only quite recently acknowledged allegiance to the Sarawak Government, and are quite one of the most uncivilized in Borneo.

The Kalabits, who are scientifically I believe of the Indonesian race, are an agricultural people inhabiting the large tableland in the centre of Borneo from which spring the Baram, Tutau, Limbang, Trusan and Padas Rivers on the West Coast and the Bahau River on the East Coast. They are very industrious and are one of the few tribes who farm by irrigation, and are therefore able to obtain two crops of paddy in the year. They are practically the same race of people as are known as Muruts in the Trusan and Padas Districts.

In build they are above the average height of Bornean natives and are well made. They are tremendous walkers (a fact which is impressed on one by the size of their feet) and it is said by Kayans that they are capable of walking in one day what other people would take two days to accomplish. This I can quite believe, as all getting about having to take place on foot they are naturally very adept and hardy at this method of progress. They have however absolutely no idea of paddling or using a boat, and when they were first brought down to the Government station at Claudetown, and saw the Baram River, they sat down in the bottom of the Kayan canoes and burst out crying, having never seen such an enormous volume of water before.

As a lot of these people had just moved into the head of the Tutau River I determined to proceed by this route, although it meant crossing the Mulu Range of hills.

On the third day of my departure from the Government Station at Claudetown I picked up Dyau Blawing, the Kenyah

chief who was going to escort me on my journey. After leaving his house, we proceeded on up the Tutau River till we reached the Tepin River.

Here the river becomes impracticable for boats on account of rapids, so the next day we started climbing up the hills, which flank the river. We were met by a party of Punans, the wild people who live in the jungle, who had been called by Dyau Blawing to show us the route over the hills. The going was very bad and fatiguing, as we had to clamber up and down the spurs of Mt. Mulu until mid-day, when we reached the foot of a hill called Bukit Sigerun Sigop, called so by the Punans on account of the wild tobacco growing there (Sigop being the Punan name for tobacco). We did not reach the summit of this hill till 5 o'clock in the evening when we must have been at least 5,000 feet up. I decided to encamp here for the night, as we were all very tired and hungry. Cooking was managed with difficulty as there was no water to be found near the summit. It was lucky for us we had the Punans with us, as they soon produced some liquid, which they had found in a pig's bathing place and which therefore did not look very appetising; still beggars cannot be choosers, so we had to make the best of it. It was bitterly cold all the night.

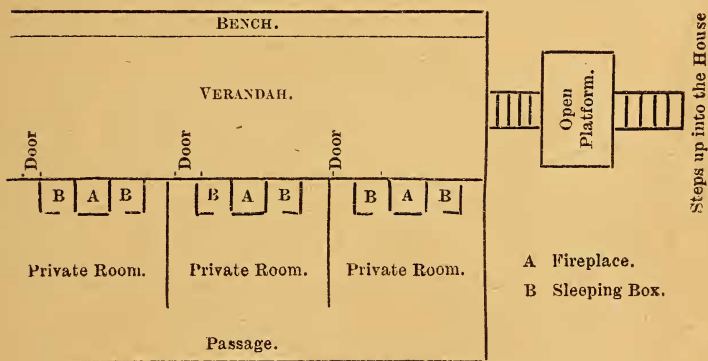
The next morning we started on the descent, and when the mists had cleared away the view was perfectly magnificent. At our feet in what seemed a crack in the hills, flowed the Tutau River whilst all round hills towered up to some thousands of feet. At midday we got through the range of hills and from a spur had a still more beautiful view. Right in front of us was the Kalabit country laid out like a map, and as this tableland is comparatively flat, we could see for miles and miles. Away to our right to the South, were the hills in which rise the Pata and Akar rivers, tributaries of the Baram. In front of us rose up Mts. Pamabo and Murud, which separate the head waters of the Baram River from the Trusan; whilst on our left were the ranges which separate the Tutau and Limbang waters.

In the afternoon we reached the Tutau River again at Long Taoh and the next day continued our journey in some canoes

we found there. We then branched off up a tributary called the Magoh and on the second day from leaving Long Taoh reached the first Kalabit villages at the mouth of a small stream called the Seridan. On our arrival we were saluted with salvoes of firing from muskets and bedils and tremendous cheering, to which we retaliated to the best of our ability. The chief Ili Bawang received us at the landing place and a sort of triumphal procession was made up to the house, where my escort were regaled with 'borak' (rice beer) and smokes, to refresh them after the fatigues of the journey.

The people of this village, who numbered some two hundred souls, had quite recently moved here from near the headwaters of the Trusan, and their chief, Ili Bawang, had evidently taken a lesson from the dimensions of the long Kayan houses in the Baram River as he had constructed a splendid house on a scale hitherto unattempted by Kalabits, whose dwellings are generally veritable hovels.

I append a sketch of the ground plan of the house.



A wall divided the house in two lengthwise; the front half was a wide verandah of about 20 feet whilst the back part was divided up into rooms, each family having a separate room. The dividing wall however did not extend to the back wall of the house, as they do in Kayan and Dyak houses, thus

leaving a passage, by which communication could be kept up from one end of the house to the other, without it being necessary to come out into the common verandah. This passage I found was used by the women, who did not appear in the verandah except on special occasions. In the centre of the middle wall was erected an enormous fireplace and on either side of this was a sort of kennel, in which the married couples slept. These were not walled in on the side next the fireplace, so as to get all the warmth possible, but of course as there was no chimney, they also got their full amount of smoke, and soot. The cold at night quite warranted these people desiring a close proximity to the fire, and I found also that a plunge into the river in the morning seemed as icy and as exhilarating as a cold bath in England.

The next day all the Kalabits collected from the villages round to the number of five or six hundred, and a grand feast was held; a buffalo and nine pigs were killed. I must admit that although the feast was a fearful orgy, still I could not help admiring the thoroughness with which these people enjoyed the meal. They began to eat at about noon and did not stop doing so until the evening and then only because there was nothing more to eat. All that was left of that buffalo were its horns and leg bones, which even Kalabit indigestion seemed to shy at. The skin I found was being eaten with the hair still on and evidently relished. Of the pigs nothing was left at all.

The meal being finished, some twenty jars of 'borak' were produced and a drinking bout was started, which lasted till day-light. Whilst this was going on, all the women, attiring themselves in their best clothes and ranging themselves in a long line one behind the other, clasping the shoulders of the one in front, began to march round the house, up the verandah and down the passage at the back and then out into the verandah again. The leader of this procession suddenly burst forth into song, whilst the others joined in the chorus, keeping time with their feet. Although their voices were rather raucous, still the song had a weird plaintive air, which was decidedly fascinating, and to which the smoky torches and wild faces made an impressive 'mise-en-scène' The song was



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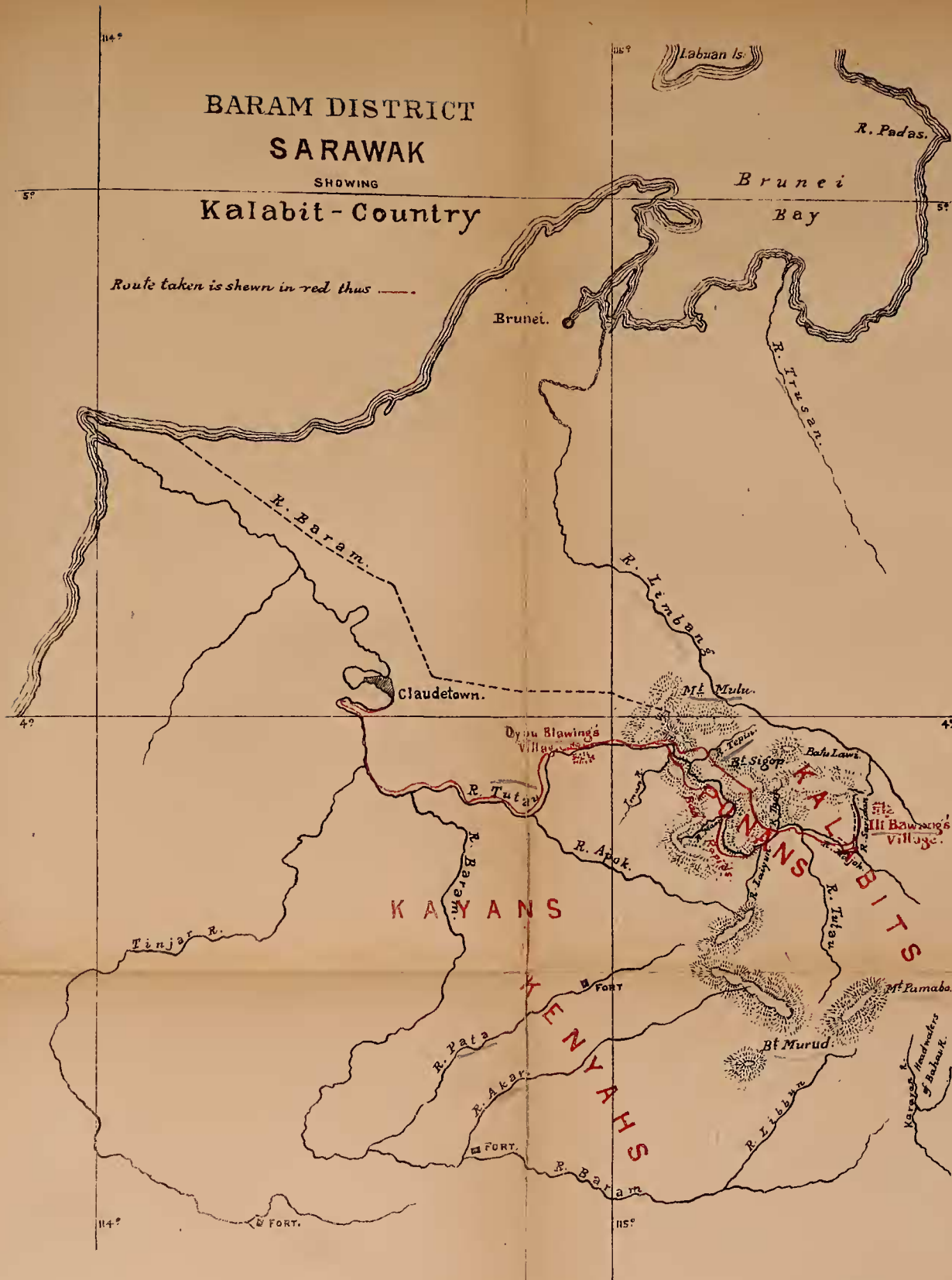
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BARAM DISTRICT SARAWAK

SHOWING

Kalabit - Country

Route taken is shown in red thus ———.



a historical recitation of the brave deeds done by their forefathers in the days of yore down to the present time, when they first came into touch with Europeans and the Government. The rhythm gradually got faster and faster until the march became a quick-step and then a double, whilst the soloist kept time by beating the floor with a stick. Presently the men got carried away with enthusiasm and joined on to the line behind, until there must have been a procession of over a hundred performers careering round the house, shouting the choruses at the top of their voices, but all keeping tune and time. The song then suddenly ceased, and the men returned to their drinking and the women to their duties in the rooms.

The next morning I went and visited the villages near by, but was not much impressed by their appearance as the houses seemed horrid dirty hovels. At one of these villages I saw the people having a rat hunt. All the men, women and children armed with sticks were engaged in turning over the heaps of rubbish and filth accumulated under the house in search of the wily rodent, which is considered a great delicacy by the Kalabits. Whenever a rat was seen, there was a tremendous 'view halloa' and the whole crowd flung themselves violently into the chase, frequently whacking one another in their attempts to slay their prey. They also lay very ingenious traps, made of bamboo and rattan, all over their houses to catch them.

I was very much struck with the industry of the women; they never seem to stop working and never shield themselves from the sun by means of sun-hats or head handkerchiefs. They wear a short skirt reaching to the knee just like the Dyak women. They are great smokers and are continually using a sort of brass cigarette holder, into which they stuff a little tobacco and puff away for a few minutes.

These people store their paddy in one large hut, which is raised off the ground some six feet, to prevent rats and other pests climbing up. Inside, this hut is divided into separate rooms for the different owners.

That night another meeting was held and all the different chiefs proclaimed their loyalty to the Sarawak Government.

Dyau Blawing then toasted the Kalabit chief Ili Bawang to the rousing tune of the Kayan drinking song which with its rolling chorus was much appreciated by the Kalabits. Opportunity is taken during these extempore songs to tell the individual who is toasted the customs of civilized Government and to make certain trite remarks as to his former life and conduct, which he must now reform.

After this was over they settled themselves down to drinking, in which occupation every night was spent during our visit there. I noticed that when a drink was offered to any man, all the people near by caught hold of the arm of the giver, those further off catching hold of the arms of those nearer, thus making the drink appear to come from all of them and so the harder to refuse. If a chief was being offered one it often happened that some thirty or forty persons would collect round him to assist in forcing the liquor down his throat.

The Kalabits were the most generous of hosts, and whilst we stayed with them we wanted for nothing in the way of food, and every day presents of fowls, eggs, sugarcane and sweet potatoes were brought to us. They seemed genuinely pleased to see us and compared favourably their life under the Government to their former one further in the interior, with its constant alarms of war and rumours of war.

On the fourth day I received their poll tax, and, as dollars or coins of any sort were unknown in these regions, it had to be paid in rubber; every married man therefore paid in three katties of rubber.

The next day we started on our return journey. We were escorted down to the landing place by the whole population, and amidst the banging of guns and repeated expressions of 'au revoir' and wishes for a safe journey, and the usual accompaniment of cheering, we started down-river.

Our return was very different from the journey up; there was no hard poling and pulling up rapids, for with our experienced boatmen, these were shot with ease in quick succession.

At midday we reached the mouth of the Magoh River and here I had arranged for a meeting of all the Punan tribes who range through the dense jungle round here. We found about